beyond a daily wage, and the pursuit of comparative advantage.

The work would also be stronger if the author could provide more detail as to how profitable the Boott was and where the profits were re-invested; Gross makes it clear that profits were not plowed back into the mill. It is probable that the figures are simply not available but, if they could be presented, they would make a strong case even more convincing.

In his postscript Gross draws parallels between modern entrepreneurs, who are often criticized for "being devoted to the production of profits, not of goods" (p. 242), and the owners of the Boott. He argues that the modern "plunderers" are not anomalies but are the legitimate descendants of the financiers who organized Lowell and the Boott. In short, Gross turns a study of a defunct textile corporation into a condemnation of economic practices and theories that are widely accepted today and are inherent in the North American Free Trade Agreement. How his thesis will be received and incorporated into the interpretation of Lowell is an interesting question.

Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*

Paul Nathanson

Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 236 pp., 20 illus. Cloth U.S. $42.00, ISBN 0-226-76966. Paper U.S. $15.95, ISBN 0226-76967.

In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America,* Lynn Spigel presents a social history of the new medium. Like both film and radio when they originated (and, for that matter, printed books), television did not become culturally integrated without controversy over its possible benefits and dangers. Spigel focusses attention on public debates, both explicit and implicit, over the relation between television and family life at a time when the nuclear family itself was being transformed by rapid social and economic change. The first chapter is about popular notions of both home and entertainment that emerged between the Victorian period and the years following World War II. The rest of the book is about the controversies that arose over specific problems associated with television. On moral, practical and even aesthetic grounds, for example, some people thought television would prove to be a beneficial and unifying force in the home, while others thought it would prove to be a destructive and divisive one. Of interest to Spigel is not so much the merits of arguments on either side but the existence of these arguments.

She refers to the latter as "discourses." I am irritated by her repetitive use of this word. But I would be troubled by her undisciplined and tendentious use of it in any case. Sometimes she refers simply to a debate or discussion. At other times, she refers to the specialized topic of a debate or discussion. At still other times, she refers to the "hidden agenda" of a debate or discussion. By now, it is no secret that discourse, especially when used in the plural and in this third sense, is a code word that identifies deconstruction. The basic premises are that (1) reality is known to us only through language; and (2) language is inherently subjective and biased: ergo (3) all forms of communication are culturally "constructed" (another dreadfully over-used word) to serve the special interests of some class and its "ideology" (a word she uses in the Marxist sense). Scholarship is not properly the study of empirically verifiable and supposedly objective facts, therefore, but the deconstruction, or problematization, of value-laden discourses that purport to be value-free. Scepticism about language is hardly a new idea. What is new, however, is the idea that language is totally incapable of conveying information about the outside world. Taking this to its logical conclusion would not only undermine scholarship, of course, but subject deconstruction itself to the same critique. Advocates resort, therefore, to a kind of selective cynicism: they deconstruct only the

discourses they dislike, those said to be dominant or hegemonic. And the result is a kind of academic and political opportunism: in the void left by competing discourses, they install at the supposedly non-existent centre what amounts to one of their own. Drawing extensively and uncritically on the work of other feminists, this is precisely what Spigel does.

Spigel tries to make two major points: (1) that the main problem generated by television was conflict over the nature of gender (although she places this in the context of a more general conflict over the nature of domesticity); and (2) that women were actively involved, through their own magazines, in the negotiations over the nature of television (not merely passive victims of exploitation by manipulative, male industrialists). Though far less polemical than that of some feminists, Spigel's work does have an edge whenever it touches on gender. Unlike some of her colleagues, she acknowledges that masculinity is an artificial construction no less than femininity. But in spite of a nod now and then to problems created by television for men (such as the depiction of fathers as fools), she assumes that the problems created for women are, in effect, central to any discussion of gender. Her approach, which should be clearly identified as part of the feminist discourse, can be challenged as gynocentric for precisely the same reason that others can be challenged as androcentric: it obscures as much as it reveals. The cultural meaning of manhood has always been more problematic than that of womanhood, if only because nature itself provides men with no practical or symbolic equivalent of childbirth. When television arrived on the scene, conventional notions of masculinity still inhibited the kind of collective (or even individual) introspection that allowed women to discuss openly the problems created by conventional notions of femininity (that is, the function of women at home or in society). Apart from a few members of the intellectual elite, such as Ernest Hemingway and Arthur Miller, very few men discussed the deepening crisis of masculine identity. With two world wars and a great depression in the recent past, not to mention a technological revolution looming in the immediate future, men who worried publicly about the role of women – that is, men who worried privately about their own roles – were not necessarily either stupid or sexist; they had perfectly good reasons for worrying (though not always for the solutions they proposed). Had Spigel considered it worthwhile, she could have restored the scholarly balance by examining the indirect and symbolic discourses on masculinity in so many films, magazines and television shows of the period (or at least suggested that others do so).

The book is also flawed by Spigel's use of source material. It is based primarily on generalizations from her own perusal of popular magazines. Readers must take her word for it that "most magazines" presented this image of women's work or that image of domestic space. The book would have been more useful (though not more readable) had she first established well-defined categories based on easily observed formal properties – line, colour, calligraphy, and symmetry, for example, in the advertisements – and then systematically classified her data accordingly. Who knows what she might have found? Her initial hunches might have been confirmed. On the other hand, she might have discovered some quite different patterns, individual articles or ads that show signs of ambivalence and confusion, or, at the very least, a few significant and suggestive anomalies. As she herself describes the period, after all, it was characterized by anxiety and inconsistency.

Nevertheless, *Make Room for TV* is worth reading for anyone interested in social history, semiotics and, of course, the many fields associated with communications. Moreover, apart from the repetitious use of a few code words – and the consistent substitution of *compassionate* for *companionate* to describe an ideal of family life that had been held since the late nineteenth century – it is well written.